

["I is a Baptist"]

"I IS A BAPTIST"

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Wesley Anthony (Negro)

Augusta Highway

Washington, Georgia

Preacher and Laborer

"Yes 'um, here I is!" said Wesley Anthony, a venerable Wilkes County Negro, as he entered the office in response to my "come in." A perfect picture of auto bellum politeness he made as he stood, hat in hand, his snowy white head slightly bowed in respect; with

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coat and tightly buttoned vest of shiny black, gray trousers and much worn shoes, all neatly brushed. From under a frayed white shirt collar a rather sober tie was knotted, and a gay studded pin stuck in as an afterthought completed his carefully made toilet. At his wrists there peeped stiff white cuffs. His eyes twinkled and there was a broad grin as I asked him in and remarked upon how dressed up he was.

In a softly modulated voice he replied, "Yes 'um, I put on these Sunday / Clo's kase you is to take my picture - that was, you said ef'n it warn't cloudy, but it is gittin' clouded up powerfully bad, an' I don't 'spose you kin do it now?"

The disappointment in his answer as it ended in a question, was almost childlike, so I hastened to promise to take the much coveted picture sometime soon on a pretty sunshiny day. Greatly' pleased he sat down somewhat stiffly in the offered chair and said, "I'se ready to talk to you now like you asked me to."

As I was writing "Wesley Anthony" preparatory to taking the interview, I said, almost to myself, "A good old Methodist name." "I is a Baptist though , " quickly corrected the old man, straightening 2 almost rigidly in his chair, "and a Baptist preacher at that."

"You are?" I exclaimed with feigned surprise. "that is fine. then I'm sure you have something interesting to tell of your religious experience."

With the question as to denomination settled satisfactorily , the aged shoulders drooped again and settled back comfortably. With dignity and an air of grave importance he slowly started his story, carefully choosing his words:

"I'se goin' to start at the very beginnin ; Mistess, and tell you all that is 'portant."

"That is just what I would like for you to do" I replied.

Thus assured, he cleared his throat: "I was borned the middle of a January on a Thursday ,so I was told. the Bible what had the dates in it got burned up, and it was

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endurin' slavery times. I was borned belongin' to Mr. Marse John Anderson, a big merchant in Danbu'g, Wilkes County, Georgy.

"He, Marse John, bo't bought my Mother from his Pa's estate, givin' one thousand dollars in money for her, and she not but 11 years old! Yes 'um, \$1,000! He [?] bought my Father from Mrs. Anthony after she ceasted. She left it so her darkies could choose out who they wanted to buy them and he choosed out Marse John kase he such a great man - the greatest thing of all was that he was a Baptist and had a christian heart and he proved it to the whole world. He was as great a man as was in all Georgy, and he was a big merchant and it was natural he had 700 customers at a time, and over 4,000 acres of land when he died. When he finished his days on yearth he left for the Glory Land, he did.

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He didn't believe in ever owin' nobody nothin' , and he raised me like that. Why I been goin' all 'round on the streets this evenin' lookin' for Mr. R. Wynne to pay him my house rent for last mont'." He laughed heartily over this, as though the idea of having to go out and find someone he owed these hard times amused him.

Thinking a minute with his head bowed to find the right place in his narrative, he continued: "My Pa was a fine mechanic. Him and his brother made the buggy Mares John went a co'tin' in. He use to make buggies and do all kinds of work like that for peoples in Danbu'g.

"I was a little boy big enough to keep in memory my young marster gettin' ready to go to the Confederate War. Then he come back I 'members I saw him a comin' a long distance away, but he had on strange clo's, not his uniform; and I runned to meet him, and he said afterwards that I jumped up on him, I was so glad to see him, but I don't 'member that part of it. After he come back from the War he called up all the darkies and he stood on the porch and talked to 'em and said: 'you all is free, just as free as I is.' But they wouldn't leave him, they all 'mained on kase he was so good to 'em.

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"In the year one-1874 - Marse John put me on a wagon to haul freight every day from Washington to Danbu'g, 12 miles, 24 miles , 'round trip. I went every day 'scusin' Sundays. At first I driv two mules and then I got up to four. I had to get up 'way 'fore day to make the trip on time. 'Long 'bout that time the stagecoach quit runnin' from Washington, Georgy , to Abbeville, South Carolina , and the folks in Danbu'g missed the mail that the stage brought 'em. So one day Marse John and some more white gentlemens from Danbu'g got in they buggies and come all the way here to Washington and had me sworn 4 in to take the mail every day. They had me prepared, Mistess, so I could take it for 'em. After that I took the mail every day and I was thus the first daily mail carrier in the County of Wilkes. Yes 'um, that I was, and I is proud that the white folks trusted me that way with their mail. 'sides all that the men use to give me big sums of money to bring to town for 'em, mostly to buy things for 'em. I 'members onc't, Marse John give me exactly \$303.00 to bring to a man here and I brought it to him that day, I handed it to him and told him Marse John Anderson sont it to him. I waited respectful like and he counted it and said, 'that's all right , Wes ley, tell John you fetched it to me.'

I said 'Yes, / Sir, but I wants a riceipt.' He said 'No need of one . you brought me the money.' And I waited with my hat in my hand, and be fretted like, 'What you waitin' for?' I said , 'My receipt.'

"With that he tore off a piece of brown paper and wrote on it and stuck it at me and didn't say nothin'. I thanked him and went on. But I'd a waited there all night but what I'd carried back a receipt. I warn't goin' to have Marse John havin' to pay that \$303.00 again on my account. You see , I knowed that man and Marse John did too.

"Marse John axed him next time he saw him what made him write on brown paper. He laughed and said, "Well, that boy you sont here with that money has got sense.' 'Nough times I have come to this town with over \$500.00 in my vest pocket pinned up in a envelope. I would count out what it would take to buy what was wanted at one place and 5 go in and buy that, and then go 'way off out of sight where nobody could see me and

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take out enough money to pay for what I had to get at another place and buy that. No, / Sir, I never did let nobody see me handle all the money I had on me! Even in them times somebody mought have knocked me out and took the white folks' money 'way from me. I use to bring cotton too and sell it for the men. I have brought 4 four and 5 five at one load many a time.

"Sixty-three years ago, come this Christmas, I married Peggy Booker. Us married the Christmas of the year one-1877 - and been livin' together ever since."

Here he broke into a marry laugh and said, "Yes 'um, I married Peggy and then I quit co'tin'. Marse John let us have his nice buggy and we [drive?] over to Marse Preacher Fortson's - he was a brother-in-law of Marse John's , and he married us standin' up in the hall of his big house. I could have married lots more gals if I had wanted to kase I was black and nice lookin' and have been well brought up and knowed how to work and make a honest livin', but I loved Peggy and I have took good care of her since. We had 15 children born to us, but didn't raise but 11 of 'em. Peggy is paralyzed now and can't do nothin' to help herself, but she been good to me and took care of me and the children . now I takes care of her. I 'members the vows what I took there 'fore Preacher Fortson when he married us, and I 'tends to do all I can for her as long as she lives. I goes to the druggists here and buys physic for her and they all knows me and if I don't have the money it is just the same, I kin get what I needs kase they knows I'se goin' to pay 'em when I gets it.

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"I hauled freight and carried mail to Danbu'g, Wilkes County, Georgy , for 10 ten years and would have continued on, but Peggy wanted me to give it up. She worried over it so, me havin' to make that long trip every day and in all kinds of weather, so to 'blige her kase she loved me and wanted to take good care of me, I live it up. But I couldn't tell Marse John I wouldn't haul for him no more, so to get out of it I told him I'd continue on if he would pay me \$300.00 a year and furnish me a whole lot of rations every week. I knowed all the time

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it was too much and that he warn't going to do it, but that was my way of gettin' 'round hurtin' his feelin's by quittin'.

"I come off the wagon and went to farmin'. I'se a good farmer, I always could make money out of the ground. I lived 'round first with Marse John and then with Mr. Walter Sutton, there in Danbu'g. I kin 'er 'vided my time twixt 'em like."

Here the old man paused as though pondering in his mind just what to say next. Scratching his head a time or two, very slowly as though to speed up his thinking, he resumed his story.

"I reckon 'long 'bout here is where my 'ligious 'sperience come in."

"Yes, yes," I said, "do tell me about that."

Thus encouraged he settled back in his chair, his face wreathed in smiles as he thought back on the "greatest thing" that ever happened to him.

"On a Wednesday, when the yearthquake was 'bout 1886, I was shook up and stirred up in my heart more greater than anything 'fore 7 that, and I raised up in bed that night while the yearth was a-shakin', and I promised the Lord secretly, if he would jest not kill me then I'd serve Him long as I lived. Mistess, I made a contract with Him that night. I went and jined the Church that year the yearthquake was, and I felt called to preach, and I prayed secretly to get rid of it, but God had work for me to do like when he called Moses; and I took the job. So I prayed on and the more I prayed the more the call come down on me, the more I was 'prest that I had to preach, 'till on a second Sunday, when Peggy had dressed up and gone to her church, and the children had gone over to they Grandma's, and I was at home by myself, I took up the Bible - it was my steppa's Bible - and I opened it like this to the first Gospel of Matthew at the 2nd chapter."

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Here the old man reached over and took a book from my desk, opened it and straightened up to his full height, holding the book at a distance from his face, closed his faded old eyes and with a look of rapture upon his kindly wrinkled face, he started at the beginning of that chapter and repeated it through without hesitating for a word. Having finished, he closed the book and laid it back in place, saying:

“And, Mistess, that was my evidence, kase I had not been to school nor college. No'm, all the schoolin' I had was in the year one-1873. I went on Sundays that year to learn to read and took my old Webster's blue back spellin' book and all the farther I got in that was 'baker', and about all I learned was my letters 8 and figures. So when I, the first time I looked inside of a Bible, found I could read, I knowed I was spiritually called, but I kept prayin' and reading secretly, still I didn't know about trying preachin' and I tried other things - playin' 'round like Jonah did, and like him, I didn't get nowheres - lost everything most I had. So finally I give up and went before the / Church and asked to be 'zamin'd to preach. They wouldn't try me, and for fifteen long years I was laid on the table of that church - they wouldn't 'mit me kase I had never been educated, they said. They said they wanted finished men - one what went to collage college - one what knowed how to preach. Mistess, I come like the inch worm, little by little, [?] til till I got there, and they wanted mens what come the grasshopper way, all in one jump. I didn't have no collage college wings, that is when preachers gets up and uses big words what goes flyin' ever folks' heads, and debates the Bible and goes on all such foolishness as what half what hears 'em don' know what he's talking 'bout, but they likes that kase it sounds big, but there ain't nothin' to it, nothin' but sound, that's all.

“I kep a-waitin' so they sent far me at a conference. They took me off down to the schoolhouse, two preachers and a whole passel of deacons did, to 'zamine me to find out if I knowed anything - they didn't think I'd make the grade so they took me off to myself. The first question they asked me was: 'What is preachin'?'

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"I answered: 'Preachin' is the power of God unto / Salvation unto all that believeth.'" And here the patriarch threw his head back and closed his eyes as he repeated his answer to his 'zaminers 9 of so many years age.

"Yes 'um, I made the grade by answerin' the first question they asked me, they was 'stonishad then and stopped right there. They put a Bible and a hymn book in my hand and said: 'As you have received these - go preach and teach.'

I didn't say nothin', but I sought wisdom by prayer and readin' my Bible, and now I been a member of the Baptist Church over 50 years and a preacher a long time, and then I been recognized and appreciated as a man of God all that time. The yearthquake did shake me up and start me off right. I preaches right now when they calls on me. But I ain't one of these new fangled preachers what uses big words and has a collage college education - collage college wings I calls it. They think if you been to collage college you got everything - can jest spread your arms and fly on, but I'se here to tell 'em they can't. That ain't the way - you got to pray and that secretly, for the wisdom and the power. They all cranks up and goes ridin' off to Sunday School and Church now and don't pay no 'tention to them what can't go. Why , I had to lecture some of the preachers and members 'bout 'glectin' Peggy, I did. Now they comes to see her and brings her the Lord's Supper 'count of her can't go to church on 'munion days like she use to. Yes 'um, I told 'em good 'bout it and stirred 'em up. I tells 'em when they don't do their duty, I'se a preacher too and so I can talk plain to 'em. "

After telling his religious experience , Uncle Wesley , as he is affectionately known to all his white friends, came down to earth again , and sat lost in deep reflection. After several 10 minutes he spoke quickly as though he had just thought of something he was about to overlook.

"Oh, yes, there is one thing I want to tell you 'bout, something most folks don't know happened. I recollect it good, and that was jest after the Confederate war , there come a

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lot of men and camped there below Danbu'g, and they done lots of mischief,[?] stealin' all the horses they could lay hands on. Why, the folks that heard they was there took all they horses down and hid them out in the Broad River swamps - 'bout 35 or 40 fine horses was hid out all 'long down the river. These folks taken a rail fence down what was 'round a pasture and moved it right smack 'cross the big public road. They done all kinds of bad things like that to pester the good peoples of Danbu'g, Wilkes County, Georgy.

"Danbu'g folks wouldn't have nothin' to do with 'em, no sir, they wouldn't, they was above [soch?] as that. But one day they come ridin' up with great pistols on they saddles and they had fine saddles too, and they had horses shod but wouldn't pay for it. Marse John Anderson and some more gentlemen was at the blacksmith shop, and Marse John was fixed for 'em, kase he warn't scared of 'em. So he went and shook his finger at 'em, nothin' but his finger like this." Here he got up and threw his shoulders back and took a step forward and vigorously shook the index/ finger of his right hand at the imaginary marauders, and said:

" 'You all is goin' 'round doin' all the mischief you can, prowlin' and stealin' and everything like that. you is mean and low down and you ain't nothin' but Wheeler's old cavalry, that's all you 11 is, jest his mean old cavalry, I know.' He quarreled with 'em and they didn't say nothin' back to him, they took what he said and jest laughed kase they see he warn't scared of 'em. So one day right after that they picked up and left, and as they passed through they was singin' loud as they could: 'Here's Wheeler's cavalry, Wheeler's in the field If he gits wounded It'll be by a wagon wheel.'

"Lots of darkies went off with 'em, and they went a whoopin' and a hollerin' and a singin' that song. I 'members that jest as good and how glad everybody was too that they had gone."

This incident reminded me of the wagon train loaded with gold that started in 1865 from Washington-Wilkes, where the gold had been safely stored during the dark days of the

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war, to Richmond, and got no farther than a little beyond Danburg before it was robbed. Thinking Uncle Wesley might know something about it , I asked:

“By the way, can't you tell me something about the wagons of gold that were robbed right after the war ? it was near Danburg, wasn't it?”

I soon found that I was not to find out anything about this robbery that has remained a mystery for the 74 years since that dark night in May when it happened.

Slowly shaking his head and in almost a whisper he said: “I ‘members when that wagon was robbed and jest where it was stopped, but I couldn't tell who got the money. It was stole down there below Danbu'g most to the line of Lincoln County, right at a old 12 schoolhouse what use to stand there. No'm, I don't know ‘bout who got the money, but it sho was took. I recollects the big stir it caused and how wild folks did talk.”

Seeing that he did not wish to talk about this unfortunate happening nor anything connected with it, I changed the subject by asking him what work he was doing now.

“I'm doin' regular farm work, but ain't farmin' for myself. No'm, the good white man what I worked with last wouldn't rent me no land, said I was too old to plow. That sho did hurt my feelin's. I'se old I know, well up in the eighties, but I'se goin' to work jest as long as I can. I walks 3 three miles to my work every mornin'. I gets up, eats my breakfast and reaches up and there is my dinner bucket the children has fixed for me the night before and I takes my stick and off I go and am at work ‘fore the hands on the farm I helps on is there. I lays younger mens than I is in the shade too, I can do more hard work now than these ordinary Negroes what has come on since slavery, they not taught to work, Mistess, they not bred and born good as us what come 'long way back yonder when folks knowed how to work and how to take care of theirselves.

“The Government started givin' me a old age pension, \$5.00 a month, but 12 twelve months ago come this January they cut me off and said I would have to wait a while and

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let some of the other old folks have some help too. I need it mighty bad, 'specially since Peggy is sick, but I goes on and does the best I can and trusts the Lord. [Pshaw?], I'se goin' to work as long as I live - I got three homes I can go to any day, 3 three good white mens what knows me and wants me 13 to come live with 'em. But I rents a little house down here on the Augusty Highway, 4 four miles from town, and I stays there and pays my rent every mont'. It makes me in-de-pendent to live like that and work for my livin' - it is more 'spectable." Rising as he said this, He stood up, and I knew the interview was at an end. As I was thanking him for coming and telling me so many interesting things, I noticed crepe on his left sleeve, a heart cut out and sewed on his coat. I asked him what it meant.

Looking down at it, he said slowly and in a voice almost too low to understand: "That is for my boy what died not long ago. he was such a good boy to me and his mother and it hurt us so to have to give him up. He left us for a better world though."

I hastened to say a word of sympathy, and the first daily mail carrier of Wilkes County, bowed low and passed out into the hall where he gathered up his overcoat and cane and, reminding me that I was to make his picture one day soon when the sunshine was bright, he went on his way.